DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 112 691 FL 007 186

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TITLE Theory vs. Taxonomy: On Teaching 'Syntactically Irregular' Verbs in Russian.
PUB DATE Oct 75
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (Atlanta, Georgia, October 9, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Descriptive Linguistics; Grammar; *Language Instruction; Language Patterns; Linguistic Theory; Morphology (Languages); *Russian; Second Language Learning; *Semantics; Sentence Structure; *Syntax; Taxonomy; Teaching Methods; *Verbs

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests methods for teaching the Russian verbs that govern what are loosely termed "objects" in oblique cases. The case government of such verbs is not necessarily an individual irregularity. Definite patterns emerge, both morphological and semantic, to facilitate grouping these verbs into classes. Russian verbs requiring genitive objects are examined first. Such verbs fall into two major semantic groups, each defined as the semantically polar opposite of the other. It is demonstrated that the groups share an underlying and very abstract semantic feature along the lines of Jakobson's theory of the semantic invariance of case. Verbs governing the dative are then examined. Some of these are examined from the viewpoint of "extended indirect objects," while others are seen as statives requiring a dative referent or addressee. Certain morphological similarities of these verbs are noted. Finally, some instrumental-governing verbs are examined as an extension of the agent/instrument categories of passive sentences, and a few others are assigned the more general meaning "use as if it were an instrument." It is concluded that the application of semantic groupings such as these, of varying degrees of abstraction, is an effective way of pedagogically systematizing an otherwise apparently unsystematic body of data. (Author/TL)

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ED112691

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The following paper was read at:

Applied Slavic Linguistics Section
National Convention of the American
Association for the Advancement
of Slavic Studies (AAASS)
Atlanta, Georgia
9 October 1975

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Theory vs. Taxonomy:
On Teaching 'Syntactically Irregular' Verbs in Russian

One of the formal characteristics of Russian that makes it considerably more difficult for the English-speaking student than, for example, French, Spanish, or even German, is Russian's system of synthetically expressed cases. Not only is this a matter of learning formal details such as cases, case endings, and declensional types, but it also involves the mastery of the many different uses of each case, so the beginning student of Russian is faced with the formidable task of deciding when and under what conditions a particular case will be used. This problem is especially acute in the instance of verbs which "govern" a certain case (and I am speaking here about constructions where the so-called object appears in an oblique case), especially when no preposition is used as a semantic prompter. For example, it would not be immediately evident to the student

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why the object cases occur as they do in sentences 1, 2, and 3 of the handout:

1. Pšenica postepenno dostigaet čelovečeskogo rosta.
   The wheat is gradually attaining the height of a person.
2. Ona vsegda l'stit načal'niku.
   She always flatters the boss.
3. Pëtr rukovodit našim texničeskim kružkom.
   Peter directs our technical circle.

Grammars of Russian have tended to portray such verbs as "exceptional" or "syntactically irregular", and often relegate them to unobtrusive sections at the end of a lesson, or else call special attention to just one of them (such as bojat'sja and the genitive) with the implication that such verbs are unique and anomalous phenomena. This kind of approach masks quite a few generalizations that can be made about such verbs, for each of them is not necessarily anomalous in its own particular way. Some of these oblique-case governing verbs break down into groups that share a common meaning, while others share a derivational structure that makes them look alike formally and act alike syntactically. The purpose of this paper will be to examine a few of these verbs (specifically some verbs that occur with the prepositionless genitive, dative, and instrumental cases) and, within the confines of a

single case, to see what they have in common. It is clearly not an attempt to explain everything, but rather a series of suggestions on how to make this difficult topic more easily assimilated by students.

I would like to begin with verbs that ordinarily occur with a so-called "object" in the genitive, since they have been rather thoroughly studied and do exhibit a definite pattern. Such verbs are usually assignable to one of two semantic categories: they either mean something like "attain", "strive for", "reach", and "achieve", on the one hand, or "avoid", "shun", and "evade" on the other. The entries under 4a and 4b of the handout give some of these verbs. Now, besides pointing out that these two groups do exist and each group has a distinct meaning, what else can be said to students about them? One immediately useful observation is that these two groups have, in one sense, diametrically opposed meanings, and thus may be defined in terms of each other, rather than separately, so that, whereas the verbs of 4a are roughly abstractable as "try to attain something" (e.g. dostigat' starosti 'to reach old age'), those of 4b mean something closer to "try not to attain something" (e.g. izbegat' neprijatnyx

vstreč 'to avoid unpleasant encounters'). This is summarized by the statement in 5, where the "minus attain" feature specification does not mean the absence of the feature [+ attain], but rather the opposite of it, hence a volitional attempt not to attain something. It should be noted that an exact definition of both [+ attain] and [- attain] would require a much more subtle paraphrase than that given here, but the present approximation will serve our purposes for the moment. It might also be added that being exposed to this concept of the relatedness of polar opposites will help students not only with their further study of Russian, where, for example, the word kstati can mean either "apropos of something previously stated", or its polar opposite "apropos of absolutely nothing". This phenomenon of related opposites also occurs in English, where, for example, the word sanction can mean either "approval", as in "the church's sanction of divorce", or "disapproval (resulting in some penalty)" as in "the government's sanctions against Rhodesia".

To return to the verbs in question, it is clearly more efficient to note that, semantically, we are dealing here with polar opposites rather than simply with two isolated classes of

verbs that must be learned separately. This relatedness - and opposition - is to a certain extent self-reinforcing.

There is only one further step that could be taken in an attempt to simplify the presentation of the verbs in 4a and 4b, and that would entail showing that these two groups of verbs share some identical, underlying semantic characteristic that produces polar opposites at a less abstract level. In other words, what we are looking for is some powerful and abstract semantic feature that will capture the meaning of the genitive government in the "attain" verbs as well as in the "avoid" verbs. The distillation of contextual variants into a single invariant feature has been suggested by Jakobson, among others, and present work on the semantics of surface cases (as well as prepositions) has brought renewed attention to Jakobson's 1958 article "Morfologičeskie nabljudenija nad slavjanskim skloneniem". I would like to suggest the following explanation to relate the genitive government of the "attain" and "avoid" verbs based on semantic invariance. Jakobson holds that every occurrence of the genitive case is characterized by the presence of the semantic feature he calls [+ Quantification], which he roughly defines as "placing some limit

on the role of the pertinent entity (i.e. the 'pertinent entity' being the word in the genitive) in the content of the utterance". This is admittedly a rather abstruse concept, and so I have given a written definition of this feature at 6 on the handout for reference purposes. Just what the limit is and how its presence is interpreted will vary according to context, and the scheme I have drawn at 7 on the handout suggests the bifurcation that yields the two classes of verbs described earlier in 4a and 4b. What is involved here is essentially this: Working from left to right in the drawing at 7, it can be said that there exists in Russian a group of verbs manifesting the feature of [+ Quantification]; in other words, verbs specified in the lexicon as having some sort of reference to a limit. When these verbs occur with objects, the feature of [+ Quant] is copied from the verb onto its object at some point in the derivation of the sentence, and the result is an objective <u>genitive</u> rather than an objective <u>accusative</u>. The set of [+ Quant] verbs in Russian bifurcates, giving two subgroups, each having reference to a limit. The "attain" verbs denote that the limit is there to be broken, while the "avoid" verbs refer to the imposition and maintenance of the

limit. It should be noted that verbal aspect can play a role here as well. For example, the imperfective zasluživat' "deserve, merit" is normally used with the genitive as in 8a (Ėta kniga zasluživaet vsjačeskoj poxvaly 'This book merits every possible praise'), but the perfective zaslužit' "win, gain" normally takes an accusative object as in 8b (Prezident zaslužil doverie naroda 'The President gained the trust of the people'), since the limit here in the perfective has already been overcome and plays no semantic role at the moment of the utterance.

Now, a practical problem still remains: Just how abstract and complex a picture can be effectively presented to students of Russian in an attempt to systematize a body of data like that given in 4a and 4b? There comes a point when the effort expended on learning a theoretical mechanism designed to handle such data exceeds that that would be spent on simply learning items in isolation. This point of equilibrium will vary from student to student, but I think it is safe to assume that the more advanced a student is, the more able he is to profit from abstract statements like I have just made in an attempt to systematize two apparently unrelated phenomena. At the very

least, students should be told early on that, as far as case government is concerned, verb groups sharing the same basic meaning may take objects in the same case - for example, verbs with the general meaning "control" or "manipulate" often govern the instrumental in Russian; those meaning "attain" or "avoid" can take the genitive; those interpretable as "extended indirect objects", which I will discuss next, take dative. Admittedly, this still leaves a number of high-frequency verbs unaccounted for, but the list has been significantly shortened.

I would now like to leave the topic of semantic invariance and quickly move on to some other verbs, this time those governing the dative, and suggest some ways of approaching them systematically. A student's first and most frequent exposure to verbs with the dative is, of course, the indirect object construction, so it is safe to assume that structures of the form "On nam èto skazal" and "Ona vam èto dala" are firmly entrenched in the student's mind. Building on this basic foundation, a number of other dative-governing verbs can be absorbed into a class of what I would like to call "extended indirect object" verbs. For example, l'stit' is

normally translated as "to flatter", but a more revealing paraphrase of it for the student might be something like "to tell flattery (to someone)". It might therefore be best to introduce students to this verb with examples exhibiting a direct, physical meaning (i.e. orally telling something flattering to someone) as in Ona vsegda l'stit načal'stvu, so that the conrection with the structure "skazat' plus dative indirect object" is revealed, and only afterwards deal with more figurative (i.e. non-oral) types of flattery, as in Uspexi l'stili ego samoljubiju. Some similar verbs, classifiable as skazat'-type verbs, are given in 9 on the handout.

A similar list can be made up for dat'-type verbs with dative indirect objects ("to give something to someone"), some of which have roots in {daj} or {davaj}: sdavat'sja 'surrender to', poddavat'sja 'lend oneself to', podvergat'sja 'undergo, give oneself up to', podčinjat'sja 'be subordinated to', doverjat'sja 'put one's trust in', and others.

The verb pomogat'/pomoč' 'to help' will serve nicely as another core verb for classificatory purposes. Its case government can be more readily felt if it is translated as

"be helpful to", a stative and therefore intransitive verb. The idea that stative verbs are intransitive is useful not only here: the stative-causative opposition occurs constantly in Russian, for example in the pairs sidet'/posadit', ležat'/položit', and stojat'/postavit'. In any case, under the stative (pomogat') category we can assign a number of verbs suffixed in { -ova- } which themselves are built on abstract deverbative nouns suffixed in { -stv-o } or { -stv-ij-o }, or on the enlarged suffix { -t'el'stv-o }. One such verb is prepjatstvovat' "to oppose", best paraphrased as the stative "to be in opposition to"/"to be an obstacle to". Several other statives with similar morphological structure are given in 10 on the handout. Also governing the dative are several verbs with no common morphological properties other than that none of them is suffixed by the intransitivizing particle { -s'a }. Many of these denote emotional states or mental activities directed on an object which appears in the dative. Among them are the verbs: threaten, envy, indulge, vex, harm, betray, irritate, and bore. They are given at 11 in the handout.

Verbs that occur with the instrumental present a rather varied picture that makes any neat classification of them

illusory. However, the frequent occurrence of the instrumental as agent or instrument in passive constructions should be familiar to most students, so it can be used as an opening wedge to explain a number of verbs occurring with the particle { -s'a } that have quasi-passive meaning. For example, if uvlekat' means "distract, attract, allure", uvlekat'sja čem-to (instr.) can be perceived as at least a proximate passive, i.e. "to get carried away by"/"be attracted by". Much the same thing can be said of the verbs plenjat'sja "be fascinated by/with", vozmuščat'sja "be angered by/with", and ogorčat'sja "be distressed by/at".

Another use of the instrumental familiar to most students would be the instrumental of means or manner, as in On èto napisal karandašom "He wrote that in pencil/by means of a pencil". Such instrumentals contain in their meaning an element of being controlled, manipulated, or used in some way by the subject-agent. Similarly, there is a group of verbs in Russian that share, to varying extents, the common meaning of "control, use, manipulate", and they generally take objects in the instrumental case. These are not true instrumentals of means, but to a certain extent they all do

incorporate a figurative meaning paraphrasable by something like "use as if it were an instrument". Some of these verbs are listed at 12 in the handout, and it should be noted that a special subgroup of them deals with movements and manipulations of body parts such as hands and feet. The sentence On postučal v dver' kulakom could be translated as "He knocked his fists on the door", but it just as easily lends itself to the instrumental of means version "He knocked at the door with his fists".

I would like to conclude by saying that there still remains a sizable group of verbs whose oblique case government is not explainable in terms of the groupings discussed above, and these verbs - some of them of very high frequency - would probably best be learned individually by the student for the time being. What is important, however, is to separate the really anomalous ones from those explainable or classifiable in simpler terms, thus reducing the load of pure memory work for the student. A tactic like this is fully analogous to the growing trend of teaching morphological changes like consonant mutations (sneg/snežnyj being one example) as regular patterns in inflectional and derivational morphology, rather than as isolated oddities. It would therefore seem that the teaching

of regular patterns (of varying degrees of abstraction) in the area of verbal case government is also an effective and altogether logical teaching device.

Handout
Applied Linguistics Section
AAASS - Atlanta Conference
9 October 1975

On Teaching "Syntactically Irregular" Verbs in Russian

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1. Pšenica postepenno dostigaet čelovečeskogo rosta. (genitive)
   "The wheat is gradually attaining the height of a person."

2. Ona vsegda l'stit načal'niku. (dative)
   "She always flatters the boss."

3. Pëtr rukovodit našim texničeskim kružkom. (instrumental)
   "Peter directs our technical circle."

4a. Some "attain" verbs with genitive:

deržat'sja pravoj storony	"keep to the right side"
dobivat'sja populjarnosti	"achieve popularity"
domogat'sja soglasija	"press for an agreement"
dostigat' starosti	"reach old age"
žaždat' mira	"crave for peace"
ždat' udobnogo slučaja	"await the right opportunity"
zaslužívat' vnimanija	"deserve attention"
iskat' zaščity	"search for protection"
kasat'sja voprosov	"touch upon questions"
priderživat'sja tvërdyx ubeždenij	"hold to firm convictions"
trebovat' bol'šoj opytnosti	"demand great proficiency"

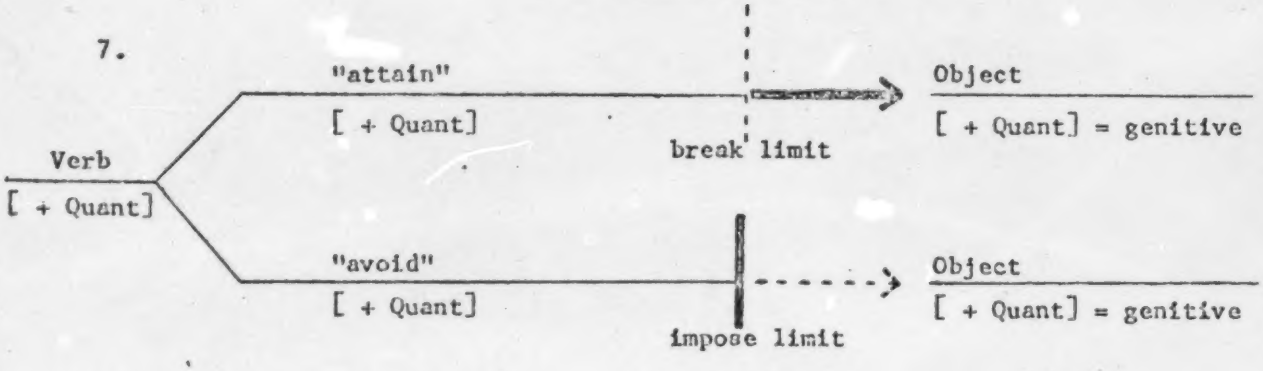
4b. Some "avoid" verbs with genitive:

bereč'sja sobaki	"beware of the dog"
bojat'sja smerti	"fear death"
izbegat' neprijatnyx vstreč	"avoid unpleasant meetings"
ispugat'sja vsego	"be frightened of everything"
lišat' izbiratel'nyx prav	"deprive of voting rights"
osteregat'sja ètogo čeloveka	"watch out for that man"
opasat'sja grozy	"be afraid of a thunderstorm"
stesnjat'sja publiki	"shy away from the public"
storonit'sja ženščin	"avoid women"
strašit'sja otvetstvennosti	"dread responsibility"
stydit'sja svoego položenija	"be ashamed of one's position"
čuždat'sja novyx vpečatlenij	"shun new impressions"

5. Verbs of 4a: "try to attain" = [+ attain]
   Verbs of 4b: "try <u>not</u> to attain" = [- attain]

6. Genitive: [+ Quant]
   Quantification: "the imposition of some sort of limit on the entity's participation in the utterance's content" (Jakobson: <u>Morfologičeskie nabljudenija nad slavjanskim skloneniem</u>, 1958)

7.



8a. Èta kniga zasluživaet vsjačeskoj poxvaly.
"This book merits every possible praise."

8b. Prezident zaslužil doverie naroda.
"The President gained the trust of the people."

9. Skazat' type indirect objects:

vozražat' dokladčiku	"complain to" (say a complaint to)
grubit' staršim	"say rude things to"
derzit' učitelju	"be impudent towards" (say impudent things to)
l'stit' načal'stvu	"flatter" (say flattery to)
lgat' samomu sebe	"lie to" (say a lie to)
perečit' roditeljam	"contradict" (say a contradiction to)
poddakivat' zavedujuščemu	"say 'yes' to"
podpevat' direktoru	"echo" (sing the director his own tune)
prisjagat' carju	"say an oath to"
protivorečit' drug drugu	"contradict" (say a contradiction to)

10. Pomogat' type statives with dative objects:

blagoprijatstvovat' predprijatiju	"favor" (be favorable to)
pokrovitel'stvovat' iskusstvam	"patronize" (be a patron to)
predšestvovat' etomu sobytiju	"precede" (be antecedent to)
prepjatstvovat' vsem namerenijam	"oppose" (be an obstacle to)
protivodejstvovat' proiskam vragov	"oppose" (be counteracting to)
sootvetstvovat' drug drugu	"correspond to" (be in correspondence to)
soputstvovat' zabolevaniju	"accompany" (be an accompaniment to)
sočuvstvovat' vašemu nesčast'ju	"sympathize with" (be sympathetic to)
sposobstvovat' rasprostraneniju (čego)	"promote" (be a furtherance to)

11. Emotional States/Mental Activities with dative objects:

verit'	"believe"	zavidovat'	"envy"	prikazat'	"order"
vredit'	"harm"	izmenjat'	"betray"	protežirovat'	"favor"
grozit'	"threaten"	mirvolit'	"indulge"	služit'	"serve"
doverjat'	"(en)trust"	nadoedat'	"irritate"	ugoždat'	"please"
dosaždat'	"vex"	naskučit'	"bore"		

12. Control Verbs with instrumental objects:

vedat'	"manage"	pol'zovat'sja	"use"
vladet'	"possess"	pravit'	"rule"
dirižirovat'	"direct"	raspolagat'	"dispose of, use"
zavedovat'	"manage"	rasporjažat'sja	"
komandovat'	"command"	rukovodit'	"direct"
obladat'	"own"	upravljat'	"operate"

maxat' rukami
skreževetat' zubami
stučat' kulakami
topat' nogami
kačat' golovoj, etc.